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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 001473

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI REFUGEE REPATRIATION UPDATE

Classified By: Cons/Pol Andrea K. Lewis  
For reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (U) Summary: Close to 19,000 people continue to be fed in Djibouti's three refugee camps. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program (WFP) are coordinating efforts to assist with voluntary repatriation of refugees back to Somalia. Their work is carried out through the Djiboutian National Office for Assistance to Refugees and Disaster Victims (ONARS). Difficulties with transportation logistics and conflicting interests of organizers hamper repatriation efforts. End summary.

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Repatriations to Northern Somalia (Somaliland)  
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2. (U) Of the 19,000 refugees in Djibouti, roughly 13,000 registered as originating from Somaliland, the self-proclaimed republic occupying the northernmost province of Somalia. Somaliland is now considered stable enough for those refugees to return home after 13 years in Djibouti.

3. (U) The Somalilanders are concentrated in the two largest refugee camps in Djibouti: Holl Holl and Ali Addeh. As of October 7, 2004 (the most recent count) Holl Holl harbors and feeds 6,855 individuals and Ali Addeh has 7,466.

4. (U) Between February and October this year, 7,575 individuals turned in their ration cards and accepted resettlement packages. Up to 1,200 additional refugees in Holl Holl and Ali Addeh have signed up for repatriation and are expected to turn in their ration cards by the end of 2004.

5. (U) UNHCR and WFP observers verify that despite pressures from the Djiboutian Minister of the Interior to empty the camps, repatriation continues to be voluntary. When a refugee signs up to return home, they are assigned to a convoy to be taken to Hargeisa. At the time of departure, they turn in their ration cards and receive an assistance package, which includes a small amount of cash as well as nine months of staple foods.

6. (U) Since February, 13 convoys have departed Djibouti for Hargeisa. According to a local UNHCR representative, more frequent convoys are not possible because the resettlement programs in Hargeisa are struggling to absorb the inflow, which also includes refugees returning from camps in Ethiopia. Due to food crises in Ethiopia, emptying those camps has been a higher priority to WFP and UNHCR.

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Repatriations to the rest of Somalia  
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7. (U) The transit camp, Aour Aoussa harbors mostly refugees from Southern and Central Somalia. A registration drive completed in early November counted 3,395 individuals living in Aour Aoussa. ONARS oversaw the registration process, and simultaneously identified 1,342 candidates for voluntary repatriation.

8. (U) Such a high percentage of Aour Aoussa residents wanting to return home surprised organizers. They are now grappling with the difficult logistics of the repatriation. The individuals come from all over Somalia and multiple repatriation destinations must be accommodated. Additionally, the mode of transportation is undecided. One UNHCR representative informed ConOff that they are discouraging boat transport because of perceived difficulties in loading and unloading the available vessels. However, they are balking at the quoted costs of using planes.

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The future of the refugee camps  
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9. (U) Between 300 and 400 individuals in Holl Holl and Ali Addeh are not considered eligible candidates for repatriation. These include refugees from the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as Somali individuals awaiting visa petitions submitted by relatives in the U.S., Canada or the U.K.

110. (U) UNHCR and WFP hope to encourage all Somalilanders to return home by the end of 2006. The plan then would be to move those individuals ineligible for repatriation together with anyone who chooses not to repatriate to Central or Southern Somalia into one refugee camp, and close the other two camps.

111. (SBU) Between February and October 2004, 7,575 individuals turned in their ration cards and accepted resettlement packages. However, according to local UNHCR representatives, only 20% of those that accepted the package actually crossed the border into Somalia. It is unknown how many of the remaining 80% were actually bone fide refugees who have chosen to stay illegally in Djibouti, and how many were actually Djiboutian citizens who managed to get a ration card illicitly. Some of those may have been staying in the camps, while many may have been dwelling and working elsewhere, coming to the camps only for the meals.

112. (C) Comment: The high number of "repatriation candidates" that do not leave Djibouti is worrisome. Most are suspected to be Djiboutian citizens that were simply getting free food. The fraud is particularly egregious since most "refugees" have been collecting free meals for close to 13 years. However, whether they leave Djibouti or not, the number of individuals being fed through refugee aid money is decreasing, so involved parties seem to prefer not to acknowledge the issue.

113. (C) Local government officials may also be exerting quiet pressure to turn a blind eye to this practice, as it is in their interest to have their constituents fed. ConOff was informed that any scheduled repatriations in early 2005 were likely to be postponed or canceled as repatriations will be an unpopular issue during the campaign season leading to elections in March.

114. (C) The Djiboutian Government has mandated that all refugee work by UNHCR, WFP, or any other similar organization must be coordinated locally through the National Office for Assistance to Refugees and Disaster Victims ONARS. Conversations with ONARS officials confirm past suspicions that they will have little to do and may lose their funding if the total number of refugees in Djibouti drops below 5,000. They recognize their vested interest in keeping the refugee numbers high. While they seem to be cooperating for now, repatriations may find logistics becoming increasingly difficult throughout 2005 as the coordinators attempt to extend their employment. End comment.  
RAGSDALE